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JEWISH CUSTOMS OF BIRTH, MARRIAGE, AND DEATH.

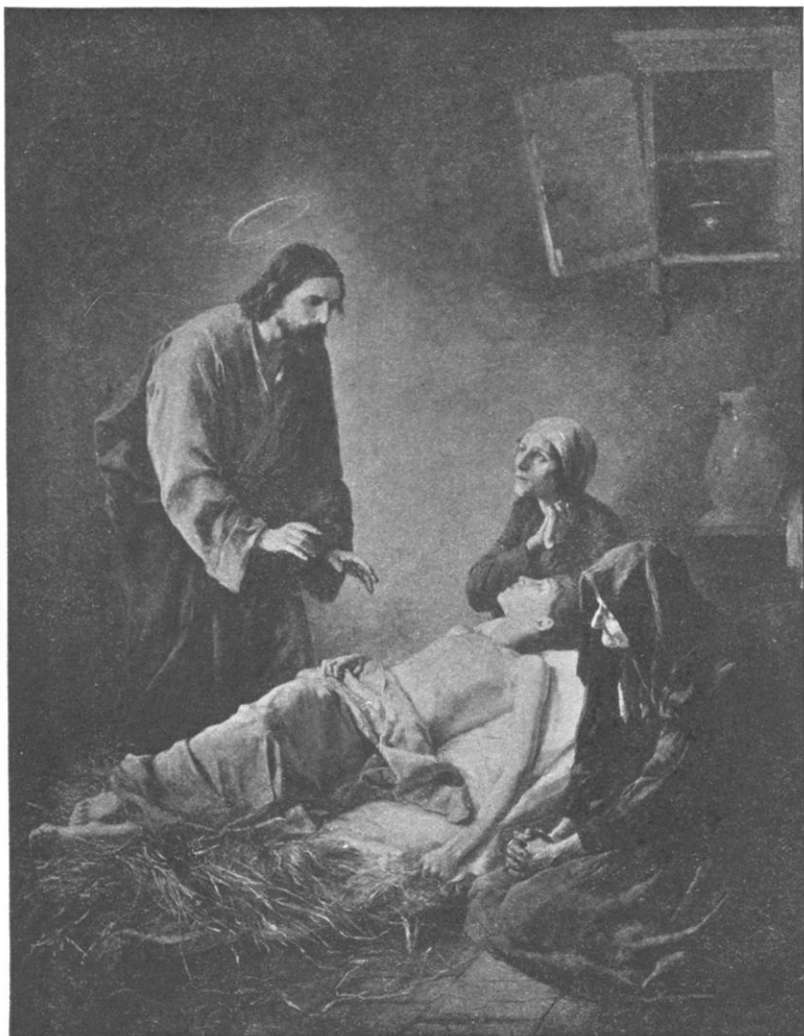
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THE customs observed by the Jews of modern Palestine are essentially the same as those practiced in the biblical period, and throw much light upon many passages of Scripture. As the three great events of the individual life are birth, marriage, and death, it will be of interest to consider how these events are treated among the Jews in Palestine, today.

I. BIRTH.

The customs connected with birth are many, and to us somewhat surprising. There is an entire absence of what we would think decorous and fitting. At the advent of the child the room, instead of being left quietly to the poor sufferer and a midwife, is filled with a noisy crowd of men, women, and children. The atmosphere is often stifling. It is an old custom among the Sephardim, if labor is protracted, to set a chair in the midst of the room for Sitt Miriam (the lady Mary), who is invited to come in and assist, but as soon as the child arrives is as hurriedly invited to retire. Who the Mary is that is so invited I do not know—perhaps Miriam, the sister of Moses; or the idea may be some Roman Catholic superstition picked up in Spain and retained all these years. It is similar to the common custom of putting an empty chair at circumcisions, and a cup of wine at the Passover for the prophet Elijah.

From the moment the child is born neither mother nor child must be left alone for a moment, as a terrible enemy of the race is hovering around to injure them. This is Lilith, the traditional first wife of Adam before Eve was made. Against her in particular, but also against the “evil eye” in general, numbers of charms are hung up. Commonly over the bed is hung a special



CHRISTUS CONSOLATOR.—*Zimmermann.*

cabalistic paper in Hebrew, together with a piece of rue, garlic, and a fragment of looking-glass. The same or similar charms may be tied to or over the door, and on the child's head. On the first available sabbath all the relatives assemble in the patient's room and make a hideous noise, reciting prayers, etc., to keep off evil spirits. It is useless to remonstrate, as I have often done—you are pityingly told that you don't understand!



A BEDOUIN FAMILY.

Should the woman die in childbirth, the husband is for some reason carefully kept out of the room, and all strangers—especially of course non-Jews—are turned out.

Although Jews as a whole set a very high value on children, and are, according to their light, very kind to them, a boy is much more highly prized than a girl. Indeed, not to have a boy is to have in some way displeased the Almighty. Childlessness weighs heavy on the hearts of any couple, and is a frequent cause of divorce. The Psalmist¹ says, "Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed;" and

¹ Ps. 127 : 5.

the converse is remarkably true—the orthodox Jew who has no children is often a man perpetually “shamefaced.”

The loss of children is usually ascribed to the malign influence of the author of evil or of his satellites. Strange to say, they think they can often cheat the devil. Thus a Jew who has lost several children sometimes pretends to sell his next child to a friend, in order that the devil (or the “angel of death”) may overlook it. Or he calls the child by an ugly name, or by the name of an unclean beast (*e. g.*, Wolf), that he may make the invisible powers imagine he does not care for it.

The eldest son has the duty of saying the Kaddish² after his father’s death, without which the departed soul cannot rest in peace; and the sonless man must pay a hireling to do it for him. Sons are sometimes therefore called kaddishim.

The firstborn son takes a unique place. He today, as of old, has to be “redeemed.” A cohen (priest)—any member of the priestly tribe will do—must come and take from the parents “the price of his redemption,” though in the Holy Land if they are very poor he commonly returns the greater part or even all, as a present to the child. The sum paid is about four dollars and a half, after receiving which the priest holds the money over the head of the child and says in Hebrew: “This instead of that, this in exchange for that, this in remission of that. May this child enter into life, into the law, and into the fear of Heaven! May it be God’s will that whereas he has been admitted to redemption, so may he enter into the law, the nuptial canopy, and into good deeds! Amen.” He then places his hand on the child’s head and gives the priestly blessing. A similar ceremony and feast take place at the redemption of the firstborn of a donkey.³

All males are of course circumcised on the eighth day, except in circumstances of extreme debility. A circumcision is a time of great rejoicing. The infant is carried to the synagogue grandly dressed, accompanied by a number of relatives in their best garments. After the performance of the rite, the day is kept as a feast, with drinking and music in the child’s home.

² See note at end, “The Kaddish to be said by mourners.”

³ Exod. 13:13; Numb. 8:17, etc.

Usually this takes place in the bedroom of the mother, and little or no allowance is made if she is ill. Should a child die uncircumcised, the body is circumcised with a piece of glass after death.

At the age of twelve or thirteen (the former age in the case of an orphan) every boy must keep his Bar Mitzvah—his coming of age as it were—when he takes on his own shoulders the responsibility of his sins. He is expected at this time to read in Hebrew a portion of the law in the synagogue, and among the Ashkenazim he has to recite a sermon in Hebrew, which he learns by heart during several weeks before the great event. This, too, is an occasion of great feasting and rejoicing in the family.

II. MARRIAGE.

At eighteen, if not before, every respectable young Jew with any pretensions of religion ought (according to the chachamin) to marry. To do so is a mitzvah, *i.e.*, an act of merit and essential to true piety. The men marry young, in the period between sixteen and twenty years of age, and the brides are often mere children. Twelve years is not an unusual age among the real eastern Jewesses, and fourteen is quite common. From every point of view these early marriages are disastrous. I know of women, who are certainly not twenty years



A BRIDE IN MODERN PALESTINE.

old, with four or five children; by thirty such people are old women, and perhaps grandmothers. It is certainly one of the causes of poverty and want of progress among Palestine Jews that young people burden themselves with family cares in their youth. Marriages of this kind are of course mutually arranged by the respective parents, and the bride and bridegroom have little or no voice in them. Though money considerations play a large share in the mutual arrangement, students of the law are highly valued as bridegrooms, many of whom have, in addition to piety, an endowment from the Khaluka.⁴

A formal betrothal precedes marriage by several months. At such a betrothal the parents and friends meet together. A scribe draws up a marriage contract in which is stated the amount of dowry from the bride's parents, etc. When all is arranged and agreed to, the two fathers shake hands before witnesses. They are then asked if their children consent to the proposal, and the bridegroom takes a cup of wine and exclaims: "Blessed be thou, O Lord, King of the world, who hast sanctified us with thy commandments." He then drinks a little and hands the glass to his betrothed.

The marriage is accompanied by several interesting customs, which, however, vary greatly among different classes of Jews.⁵ Among the Ashkenazim the ceremony is usually held in a synagogue, but among the Spanish Jews and others in the house. The bride and bridegroom stand together side by side under a canopy, the khuppah. The bridegroom stands at the left of the bride, because it is written: "Upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir."⁶ The bride is led three⁷ times around the bridegroom, and the two then go together around the khuppah once; the people sometimes throw grain over them, exclaiming, "Be fruitful and multiply."

On being seated the rabbi, or whoever is officiating, places the hands of the couple together and covers their heads with a tallith, or praying shawl. He or a relative then takes a glass of wine,

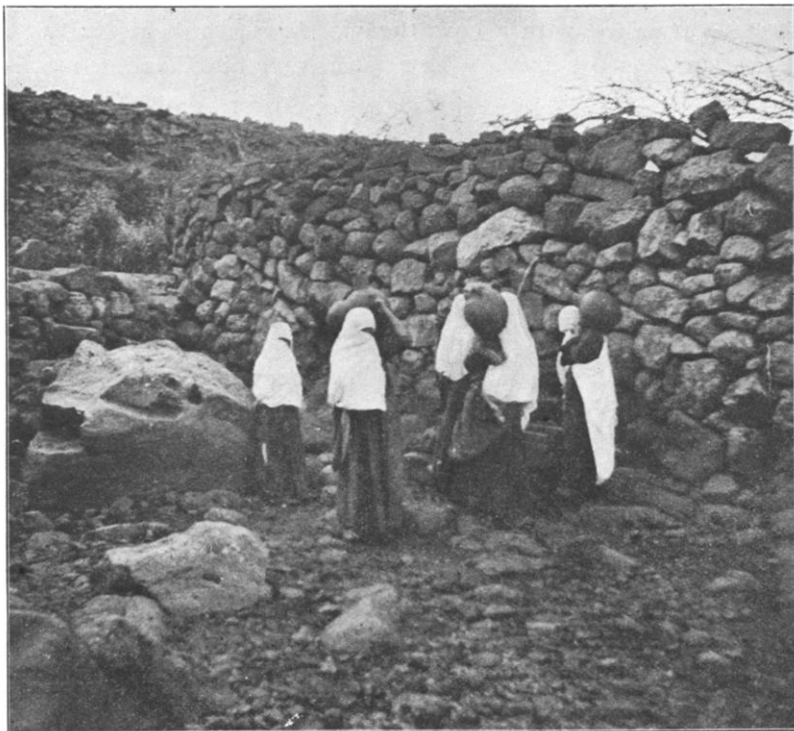
⁴ See the previous article in the *BIBLICAL WORLD* for August, 1903, pp. 88 ff.

⁵ The account given here is a type of what occurs.

⁶ Ps. 45 : 9.

⁷ This is an Ashkenaz custom.

pronounces the marriage blessing, and gives them both some wine to drink. The bridegroom then faces the bride and places on her index finger a gold ring—among the Ashkenazim this is usually plain, but among the Sephardim it is inscribed with שדי ("Almighty")—saying: "Behold, through this ring thou art



GIRLS WITH WATER JARS.

married to me according to the law of Moses and Israel." The marriage contract is then read in the presence of witnesses. The rabbi then, while holding another cup of wine, pronounces the "seven blessings," and the ceremony ends. It is customary toward the end to break a wine glass to signify that amid all our joys there is sorrow.

After the marriage has taken place the bride and bridegroom sit together for seven evenings under the khuppah, while each

day guests—not less than ten and, if possible, different ones each evening—are entertained by the parents.

The strangest marriage I have heard of was one which I have good authority for saying occurred here some years ago. A man had married several wives, all of whom had died in childbirth. Thinking he was under some magical spell, he went through the form of marriage with a cow, the wedding ring being actually placed on the cow's horn. The cow was then killed and he immediately married a bride in the ordinary way—the curse having, as he thought, been removed.

Although, as is well-known, the rabbinical teaching allows a great deal of liberty⁸ with respect to divorce, this liberty is not used by strict Jews from trivial motives. Childlessness is a common cause of divorce, and also prolonged helplessness on the part of the wife. In a country like Palestine, where the civil law is not opposed, it is not very uncommon for a Jew, even a leading rabbi, to have two wives. The general restraint against this practice is undoubtedly the indirect effect of Christian teaching, and of civil law founded on such teaching. Eastern Jews are very free with divorce, as are their neighbors, the Moslems.

III. DEATH.

Death, even to the most pious Jew, is a gloomy visitor. The saddest words of the Old Testament writers concerning this darkness, gloom, and silence seem to predominate in the thoughts of the Jew of today. He can be rescued from the abode of silence only by the prayers of those he leaves behind. The Kaddish⁹ contains no reference to its being a prayer for the dead, but it is always used for that purpose. The pious son must say the Kaddish for his dead parent, not only at every anniversary of the death, but also at the three great feasts—the New Year, Atonement, and the Rejoicing of the Law. A son who has *not* lost a near relative must not, however, stay in the synagogue when the Kaddish is offered on these days, lest (it is

⁸ Rabbi Akiba even stated that it was sufficient if a man found some other woman more attractive than his wife.

⁹ See below.

said) the "angel of death" should be reminded that he has *not* taken his parents and should mark them as early victims! Wealthy Jews bequeath money to pay people to say the Kaddish or read the Mishna for the repose of their souls.

The last words uttered by the departing soul must under all circumstances be, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord."



THE TRADITIONAL TOMB OF LAZARUS AT BETHANY.

As soon as a death has clearly come, all water in the house is poured out. The origin of this custom is obscure: it may be symbolic, or it may be to announce in an indirect way (to do so directly is unlucky) that a death has occurred. Whatever the root-idea, various superstitious explanations are given. The "angel of death," they say, cleanses his dripping knife in the water as he passes out, or perhaps the departed spirit may get drowned. In the same way looking-glasses are turned to the wall, probably really as a sign of mourning, but the superstition is that it is done lest the spirit see itself reflected in the glass.

After half an hour the body is removed from the bed and laid on the floor. The eyes are closed, and the limbs stretched out. Special people, corpse-washers, wash the body thoroughly all over. It is then wrapped in a shroud, and two candles are placed at the head. Shrouds are prepared beforehand for this occasion and worn on the Day of Atonement; sick people not uncommonly have the candles to be burned at their funeral hanging up in their room! The body is not for a moment left alone, it being thought by some that wandering spirits might take possession of it; it is watched continually.

As a rule, the funeral is on the day of death. There is no coffin; and the body is carried on men's shoulders upon an open bier. The relatives and friends, accompanied usually by a number of professional beggars, form the procession; and this is commonly an irregular and disorderly affair. Some chant passages of the Psalms (the end of Psalm 90 and the beginning of Psalm 91) in a desultory kind of way; others with loud shouts of "Cohanim!" warn the priests of their coming; and the beggars demand alms for themselves with loud cries that "Alms save from death." At the door of every synagogue the procession pauses and the Kaddish is recited. Finally the cemetery, usually on the west slope of the Mount of Olives, is reached, the body is laid in its shallow grave, the Kaddish is recited and all is over. The procession is more important than the ceremony at the grave.

Should death occur on the sabbath, delay must necessarily occur. The body cannot be washed nor the candles lighted until after the Day of Rest. After sunset, however, proceedings are frequently carried out quickly, the funeral procession being illuminated with candles, torches, and lanterns. Should death occur shortly before the sabbath, the funeral may be hurried through in what seems to us a most unseemly manner, and the bearers may, as I have witnessed, positively run with the body all the way to the grave. Graves are always dug before the sabbath, to be ready to receive bodies under such circumstances.

The near relatives are obliged, after a death in their family, to keep in the house for seven whole days, during which time

they are supposed to sit on the ground and wear no shoes as a sign of mourning. Friends may come to make up the requisite ten to form a *minyan*, or "congregation," people being summoned from the street, if necessary, with the invitation, "come for a minyan." The Kaddish cannot be said without a "congregation." A lamp must be kept burning all the time, and also at every anniversary; should the lamp be accidentally extinguished it is considered a bad sign. Near the lamp are placed a cup of water and a towel; it is supposed the spirit comes and washes itself there. At the end of the week the grave is visited and the Kaddish recited.

THE KADDISH TO BE SAID BY MOURNERS.

Mourner: Magnified and sanctified be his great name in the world which he hath created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom during your life and during your days and during the life of all the house of Israel, even speedily and at a near time, and say ye, Amen.

Congregation and Mourner: Let his great name be blessed forever and for all eternity.

Mourner: Blessed, praised and glorified, exalted and honored, magnified and lauded, be the name of the Holy One, blessed be he; though he be high above all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations, which are uttered in the world, and say ye, Amen.

Congregation: Let the name of the Lord be blessed from this time forth and for ever more.

Mourner: May there be abundant peace from heaven and life for us and for all Israel, and say ye, Amen.

Congregation: My help is from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Mourner: He who maketh peace in his high places, may he make peace for us and for all Israel, and say ye, Amen.